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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine: (1) the extent to which the Alternative Pre-School Program (APSP) affected Brazilian parents' and children's attitudes toward school; and (2) the extent to which parents encouraged children to repeat at home the skill development activities they experienced at school. The program, which provided educational assistance to low-income children, was designed and implemented by the Rio de Janeiro State Department of Education. The APSP offered low cost education, health care, and nourishment to children between 3 and 6 years of age. The program used community volunteers and unused spaces in existing schools to provide services. In the study, the two groups compared contained 36 children who had participated in the program for at least 2 years and their parents, and 36 children who either attended traditional or no preschool and their parents. Findings suggested that promoting positive attitudes on the part of parents toward school is an effective way to promote positive attitudes toward school in children. Positive attitudes in parents may be realized by involving them in classroom activities. (RH)

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EFFECT OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES ON PARENT'S AND CHILDREN'S ATTITUDE TOWARD SCHOOL

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EFFECT OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES ON PARENTS' AND CHILDREN'S ATTITUDES TOWARD SCHOOL

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The results of the study sponsored by the World Bank (Smilansky,1979) suggest that the more successful pre-school intervention experiments were those involving the participation of parents.

Robert Grawe (1979) reviews the role of childhood ability as a determinant of subsequent earnings and identifies the family structure and the status of the mother as consistent predictors of ability for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Smilansky's and Grawe's findings cannot be generalized because they relied on data from developed economies. What would be the results of adapting pre-school programs involving participation of parents in less-developed countries?

The purpose of this paper is to describe the results of an investigation on the effects of an alternative pre-school program designed and implemented in a developing area on first grade student and parent attitudes toward school. The investigation also assessed how often children were stimulated,at home,to repeat the activities learned at school, which are supposed to accelerate reading and writing readiness.

The Alternative Pre-School Program - APSP

The study focuses on a program - the Alternative Pre-School Program - APSP - designed and implemented by the Rio de Janeiro State Department of Education aiming at providing educational assistance to low-income children. The program offers low cost education, health-care and nourishment to children ages 3 - 6. The APSP takes advantage of spaces not in use in existing schools, and utilizes community work in a voluntary basis. Only one teacher is responsible for 80 to 120 children, divided in groups of about 10 to 15 students guided by one parent.

The program implementation included training activities for teachers and parents. Teacher training sessions contained notions of Psychology, Nourishment, Health-Care, Performing and Plastic Arts. In addition, the topics Organization and Functioning of APSP, Pre-School Activities and New Methodologies, and School-Community Relationship were discussed.

The parent training program included topics such as: One day pre-school activities; The role assumed by parents at APSP's dayly routine; Habit formation at pre-school; Parent-teacher and parent-children relationship.

Three related studies evaluated the Program. The first one, carried out by Nicolacci (Hees, 1980), in 1977, focused on children's visual and psychomotor development. The results indicated that the performance of children from APSP was significantly higher than that of children who did not receive pre-school assistance.

The second study, undertaken by Fernandez (Rio de Janeiro State,1978), in 1978, compared the readiness of children who attended APSP for two years with children from traditional pre-schools and children who had not received pre-school assistance at all. It was found that the level of readiness reached by children from APSP was

significantly higher than that achieved by the group without pre-school assistance,but lower than that from traditional pre-schools.

A follow-up study conducted by Hees (1980) assessed the performance in Language and Mathematics tests of the same sample studied by Fernandez, by the end of the first grade, in 1979. The result pointed out that the difference between the achievement of children from traditional and the alternative pre-schools was not significant. However, both groups performed significantly higher than the group of children who had not received pre-school assistance. Another important finding came out from the study: the drop out rate among the APSP group was the lowest one (17%), followed by the traditional pre-school group (29%) and by the group without pre-school assistance (37%).

Some aspects of APSP did not receive research attention, specially those related with parent training and involvement in classroom activities. However, these factors might contribute to improve parent knowledge and positive attitudes toward school,which in turn could reflect on children's attitudes.

This paper focuses on an ex-post-fact study designed to compare the attitudes of two groups of children and their parents toward school: one group was involved and participated in the Alternative Pre-School Program - APSP - for at least two years; the other attended traditional pre-school or did not receive pre-school assistance at all. The traditional pre-school does not include parent involvement and participation in classroom activities.

The goals that guided our analysis were to determine (a) the extent to which APSP affected parents' and children's attitudes toward school; and (b) the extent to which parents encourage children to repeat, at home, the activities for skill development they experience at school.

Procedure

Sample

The sample was randomly selected in three phases: geographic area (municipality); cluster (school), and unity (children and their parents). In the first phase, three municipalities were selected out of nine where APSP was implemented for more than two years. In the second phase, two school were selected from each of the three municipalities: one had adopted the APSP, the other had not.

In the third phase, 12 first grade students were selected from each of the six schools. It makes 72 children, age group 7 to 7 1/2 years old: 36 who had attended APSP for two years (Group A) and 36 who had not (Group B). The selection of their respondent parent observed as a condition the effective participation in pre-school classroom activities for Group A,and the opposite for Group B.

Instrument

A questionnaire was specially designed to obtain four types of data from parents: Part 1, parents' and children's personal data; Part 2, the practice of children's home activities which accelerate reading and writing readiness; Part 3, parents' attitudes toward school; and Part 4, children's attitudes toward school.

Part 1 - the personal data form - included items designed to identify parents' age; level of schooling; economic activities; income; length and kind of participation in pre-school activities; and children's age, sex, and schooling.

Prior to the devolopment of Part 2, a list of 30 pre-school activities related with acceleration of reading and writing readiness was compiled from the literature. The teachers involved

in APSP were asked to indicate which of the 30 activities were most frequently practiced or emphasized in their classroom. From the list, reduced to 16 activities, questionnaire items were formulated, and the items were organized into six categories:body awareness and control; space and movement coordination; sound and word production; verbal expression; fine muscle coordination; and visual motor coordination.

The same procedure was utilized to derive the items of Parts 3 and 4 of the questionnaire - parents' and children's attitudes toward school. A list of statements was gathered from the literature, then teachers and parents were asked to assess their validity and suggest other items on children's and on parent's positive attitudes toward school.

The internal consistency of the scales was tested by a split-half reliability procedure, followed by the application of the Spearman-Brown formula (Guilford & Fruchter, 1973).

Since the preliminary observation of the APSP participants detected illiterate persons among parents, the data collection assumed a schedule-structured form of personal interview.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of personal data indicated that the majority of the respondents in both groups were females (69 out of 72), age group 25 to 30 years old. The level of scholarity was very low - most of them had only 4 years of schooling (52 respondents) and a few (5) were illiterate; only 5 had more than 4 years of schooling.

Both mothers and fathers were unskilled workers and received the official minimum salary which means about US$ 50 dollars a month.

Data from the scales were analysed by applying the "t" test to compare the means of the responses obtained by the two groups of the sample. The results of the test pointed out that the means of the experimental group were significantly higher than that of the control group in the scales (Tables 1, 2 and 3).

As to children's home activities, this result may be due to the influence of the pre-school itself, but also may represent a stimulus from the parents in making their children repeat the games, songs, and other activities, whose value and significance they learned to be of help for children's development of basic learning skills. In doing so, they are reinforcing children's learning and readiness.

The results of the "t" test applied to the attitude scales allow to conclude that children and parents who participated in APSP seem to be more interested in learning and more diligent and participative in school activities in general. Parents are more interested in children's academic performance and offer more support and stimulus by praising them for their efforts, by answering their many questions, and by listening to their stories about everyday matters.

It is possible that parents' positive attitudes have influenced their children's attitudes. In addition, the presence of parents in the classroom may be a significant factor of children adjustment to school because it represents a link between family and classroom environment.

For parents, the participation in classroom activities represents a means to extend the attachment with their children,and, simultaneously, it is a way of learning how to take care of children, and to understand the real possibilities and limitations of school contribution to child development. Besides improving parent interaction with the school environment, the APSP also fosters the relationship among parents, and between school and community.

Effect of APSP on Woman Development

The face-to-face meeting for data collection allowed to detect respondents' true reactions to the APSP. One question was then included to obtain information about the extent to which they perceived changes in themselves as a consequence of the participation in APSP. The majority of respondents - 33 out of 36 - considered that APSP influenced the way they treat their children. They felt that, under influence of the teacher, they have changed from an authoritarian attitude to a more liberal one; from being aggressive and nervous to becoming gentle and kind. Furthermore, the respondents attributed to APSP's influence their improvement in communication skills; their acquisition of new knowledge such as songs,handcraft, baby-sitting, habits of hygiene, and health-care.

According to the respondents, the changes in themselves resulted also in a better atmosphere at home, as a consequence of a better wife-husband and parent-child relationship. Table 4 summarizes changes perceived by parents.

Conclusions

In spite of Smilansky's (1979) findings, according to the results of previous studies about APSP's effectiveness, there is no significant difference between the performance of children from APSP and from traditional schools. However, it was evidenced that there is a significant difference between the two groups' drop out rate.

In other words, there is no evidence that APSP - a preschool program involving the participation of parents - is more effective than the regular classes,at least as measured by cognitive tests, but it is possible that it affects positively children's

attitudes toward school.

In fact, our data provides evidence of a more positive attitude of children and parents from APSP when compared with children and parents from the same background.

As stressed by Grawe (1979),in low income backgrounds the family , and, in particular, the status of the mother, may improve pre-school outcomes. This conclusion allows to infer that APSP children's positive attitudes toward learning and practice of home activities have much to do with parents' attitudes.

It seams that promoting positive attitudes toward school in parents is the best way to promote positive attitudes in children; and the best point of intervention to promote positive attitudes in parents may be through involvement in classroom activities.

Table 1

Comparison of mean scores of the frequency of activities practised at home by children participant and non-participant in APSP

GROUPS	n	$\bar{X}$	s	t
Participants	36	52,86	6,78	
				9,54*
Non-Participants	36	38,16	6,99	

* significant

Table 2

Comparison of mean scores of attitudes of children participant and non-participant in APSP

GROUPS	n	$\bar{X}$	s	t
Participants	36	38,02	2,95	
				7,3*
Non-Participants	36	30,72	6,76	

*significant

Table 3

Comparison of mean scores of attitudes of parents participant and non-participant in APSP

GROUPS	n	$\bar{X}$	s	t
Participants	36	54,83	2,52	6,82*
Non-Participants	36	47,19	6,66	

*significant

Table 4

Changes perceived by the respondents as a result of APSP's influence

	f*
- More patience and care in dealing with their children	14
- Easier communication and better relationship with people in general	7
- Learning of handcraft, songs, sewing etc.	6
- Better relationship with their children	6
- Better relationship with their husband	6
- Less aggressiveness, more serenity	5
- Better atmosphere at home	4
- Better understanding of the school and its tasks	4
- More attention in observing their children	3

*respondents indicated more than one change

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